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Marriage Made in Heaven

03.29.2007 | Faculty, Catholic The Rev. Norbert Burns, S.M., 82, bounds into class 15 minutes early and personally greets every student. The popular priest has taught a "Christian Marriage" course to more than 27,000 students, about a third of all University of Dayton alumni.

He will stride into a lecture room, his priestly collar tucked into his breast pocket, for the last time on April 24.

Until this semester, when a virus hit him, he had not missed a day of class in 62 years, including nearly 50 at the University of Dayton.

"I decided I'd rather walk out on a high than have them carry me out," he quipped. "I've always made a pledge to my class: 'In friendship, I will be here everyday. I invite you as a friend to share this pledge with me.' I've loved every minute of it, but it's time."

Alumni, students, faculty, staff and friends are invited to a reception honoring Burns from 5 to 7 p.m. on Sunday, April 15, in the Torch Lounge in the Kennedy Union. It's sponsored by the department of religious studies and offices of the president, provost and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

"I'm older than the grandparents of my students," said Burns, who so quickly engages students in lively discussions about marriage and relationships that they forget there's a generation gap. He rarely refers to notes and runs the fast-paced class in the style of talk show pioneer Phil Donahue.

A professional marriage counselor, he shies away from giving "advice." Nonetheless, he doesn't have to think twice about what's important in any relationship. "The most important words to me are freedom and trust. By freedom, I mean doing my very, very best to enable my beloved to become the full human being God calls him or her to be. By trust, I mean that I believe in you."

Ordained a Marianist priest in 1953, he received a bachelor of arts degree from UD in 1945. He earned a doctorate in general counseling at St. Thomas University in Rome with post-doctoral work at Yale University in marriage counseling. He received a licentiate degree in theology from the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. For 25 years, he hosted a local call-in radio show, "Challenge of Modern Day Marriage," on WVUD-FM.

But Burns is best known for his "Christian Marriage" class, which he began teaching in 1963. He's a strong proponent of building marriages on the bedrock of friendship. "If you don't like the word 'dating,' that's fine, but the more friendships you have helps you in the process of identifying yourself," he tells the class. "Even if you get hurt, you learn a lot about life and love and hurt and pain. The best kind of preparation you can have for married life is how you are as a friend."

Former students have created an endowed scholarship fund in Burns' honor to award scholarships primarily to religious studies majors with financial need. To date, alumni have contributed more than \$43,000. For more information on the scholarship, call 937-229-2901.

Contact Father Norbert Burns at 937-229-4315 or 937-258-3212. For assistance in scheduling an interview, contact Teri Rizvi at 937-229-3241.